WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCES OF EX-POW NORMAN DEAN GIBBS
SERIAL NUMBER [redacted]

My experiences as an ex-POW began on January 15, 1945. We were flying in a B-17 bomber from Foggia, Italy to the target area of Vienna, Austria. On the way there, number four engine overheated, was shut down and the prop was feathered. With the loss of overall power, we dropped out of the group formation. Instead of returning to base, it was a consensus of opinion that we continue on to the target with only three engines, as at that time of the war, there were few reported encounters with enemy fighters. It was a bad decision.

We arrived over the target, dropped our bombs and made a U-turn to return to base. On the return trip, number two engine heated up and was shut down, but this time the pilot could not feather it. Fortunately, the prop was thrown off to the side and it did not damage the plane. By this time we were throwing guns, ammunition and all loose items out of the plane. As the third engine overheated, we were ordered to bail out. As I was closest to the waist door, I pulled on the emergency release cable to pull the hinge pins out, but the cable broke, it was the planes reported 97th mission. I was able to pull the hinge pins out, with a pair of pliers I carried with me, and push the waist door out. Seven men bailed out together at 11,000 feet and six landed together with the seventh joining up later. There were no injuries among our group. We found out later that our pilot caught his foot between the top turret and the bomb bay door as he jumped and broke his leg.

Not knowing where we were, we were all enlisted men, we walked south through about a foot of snow in a forest with clear-cut areas much like a checkerboard. At dusk, we holed up in a bushy area and rolled up in our parachutes to sleep as best we could. For some unknown reason, I removed my shoes and slept in my flying boots. I found the shoes frozen solid the next morning and had to wear the flying boots until the shoes thawed out. The sloppy fitting flying boots caused a large blister on my left heel that would not heal during imprisonment. In the morning fog, we found it impossible to walk in a straight line so we waited for the fog to lift. We came across a road going south so we followed it. The road turned right around a forest section and there we saw a column of soldiers coming towards us.

As they saw us at the same time we saw them, we could not run or hide so we were taken prisoners by the Croatian Army. Under guard by a squad of soldiers, we were marched into a small village and lined up against a wall with the soldiers standing guard from across a narrow road. We had no idea of what they were thinking or planning to do with us. After about a half-hour, we were taken into a house and wined and dined by civilians with the soldiers standing guard. Later we were marched to an army command post near Zagreb, Yugoslavia where we stayed about two days in a barracks with soldiers.

We were given army coats and hats, ordered onto an open truck bed with root vegetables and other things and were transported to a large town. We found out later that we were to be held as hostages for when the Russians came through. On arrival, we were stopped by German soldiers at a checkpoint, questioned, and taken away from the Yugoslavs at gunpoint. Our first real jail time under the control of the Germans.

A day or two later, the seven of us were taken to Frankfort, Germany in a passenger train with three German guards. At one point, the door of our compartment was slammed open and a German officer indicated through voice and gestures, that we were to exit the train compartment. Our guard pointed his gun at the officer, said something and the officer left. One of our crew understood the German language and told us later what transpired.

The train laid over in Vienna, Austria for a couple of hours, so our guards took us to a soup kitchen where we lined up with civilians and soldiers to obtain hot food. The lights suddenly went out and our ball turret gunner yelled, "hit the floor" which we did. When the lights came back on, we found ourselves surrounded by civilians and our guards, but the guards had their back to us and their guns were pointed at the civilians. We were hustled out of there to a small room where one of the guards brought us a pot of split pea soup. We were glad to get back on the train.

Another incident was when we were strafed and we had to remain on the train until all others had left. The aircraft must have had only enough ammunition for one strafing, as I do not recall a second strafing. There was no apparent damage to the train as we continued on our way.

We arrived in Frankfort, Germany and were marched to a building where we were each placed in individual cells with a metal cot, one small blanket and a small open window. With no way to tell time, our signal that we needed to relieve our selves seemed to be ignored. The interrogation was simple enough as they had a book with all the squadron insignia in it and a record of my high school graduation (?). I do not recall the number of days I stayed in this building, but it was definitely miserable with the cold and indifference.

I was then transported by boxcar to a camp at Wetzler, Germany where American prisoners performed a perfunctory medical examination and dressed my blister. I was also issued some clothing. Food was served in a mess hall and consisted largely of meals made up from American Red Cross parcels and whatever the Germans could provide. This was the only time that there was sufficient food and warmth. I did witness an escape by an American who climbed over a double barbed wire fence, ran away with guards hot on his heels, and was returned face down on a stretcher.

Again, we were taken by box- car to a camp near Nuremberg, Germany. Food was very scarce there and consisted of 1/2 soup can of ersatz coffee for breakfast, half a boiled potato for lunch and 1/2 can of soup and piece of bread for dinner. You picked out the bugs floating on top of the soup and ate those you could not see. Again, it was wood bunks, flat metal springs and one small blanket. Wash and other facilities were outdoors without walls and were very cold. I can remember being wakened at night when the British bombers dropped their blockbuster bombs on Nuremberg.

We were then force-marched approximately 90 kilometers to Moseberg(?), Germany. Our guards were Luftwaffe and were not very eager to get where we were going. We thought they were hoping the Americans would catch up to us, as we heard the American army was 20 miles from us but turned off in another direction. We could see each day at least one allied fighter doing lazy eight's above us to ward off others who might think we were German troops. American Red Cross trucks came by every two or three days, as the Germans had no food for us. With soap and other items, we were sometimes able to trade for bread with civilians along the route.

Mooseberg was a crowded mess. I was assigned to a barracks where I counted 7 nationalities. The Germans provided some bread and the Red Cross parcels provided the rest of our nutrition. Thievery was rampant so it was necessary to keep all your belongings and food with you all the time.

On the morning of April 24, 1945, we noticed the absence of the guards and later in the day, American tanks arrived in our compound. K rations were flying all over the place causing illness in some who ate until their bellies were extended. Order was shortly established and American white bread (which we considered to be cake, all fluff and no body) was soon being consumed.

Some days later, we were taken by truck to a nearby airfield and flown to a camp on the coast of France, given hot showers and new clothes, and loaded on a liberty ship that joined up with a convoy headed home. A three week boat trip that included a night on deck in a fog with the ship dodging icebergs and trying not to ram other ships, or be rammed. One ship was sunk and two collisions were reported.

New York, USA was a welcome sight.

End of story.